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Rebel's Return

JAMES A. WECHSLER

The name of Manuel Ray has dramatically reappeared in the news dispatches about Cuba, and the reports are a reminder of an evening spent with him in a Manhattan apartment in November, 1962.

This was a small gathering of local journalists and others drawn to the session because of Ray's special role in the annals of the Bay of Pigs disaster. For he was one of the few among the exile anti-Castroites who had warned against the folly of the invasion strategy. He had insisted that only an internal popular movement could eventually overthrow the Castro dictatorship. He had also contended such a movement could be built only by men who were committed to the basic social goals of "the revolution betrayed."

The CIA braintrusters, encouraged by nostalgic Batistaites in the exile colony, had in effect branded Ray a dangerous character. Neither his counsel nor his presence was welcomed in the exclusive CIA-sponsored set that organized the debacle.

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He was 37 when I met him, a dark, intense, handsome man still recovering from the nightmare and frustration of the 1961 tragedy in which the lives of many he had known were so stupidly squandered. Yet he still envisaged a new, better beginning. He hoped American strategists had learned some harsh lessons of history. His own life remained committed to the cause of Cuban freedom.

Now, according to the latest reports, he is somewhere in the Caribbean, preparing for secret entry into Cuba to assume a key part in mobilizing the underground resistance. In an interview with The Times' Tad Szulc at an undisclosed meeting-place, he has cautioned against premature proclamations of upheaval. He has also suggested that a major tactic will be to work inside the Castro regime and to offer a "political alternative" to privately disenchanted figures within the Castro government and military etstablishment.

The reports were entirely consistent with what he said on that evening some 18 months ago. He declared then that there were men still in high Cuban places who were retaining their posts because they hoped one day to participate in an internal coup. One cannot know how many of them have been purged by now; neither can Fidel Castro know how many remain.

And this doubt—rather than over-advertised hit-and-run operation and Miami manifestoes—is what must haunt him above all. For Manuel Ray is an engineer who fought in the anti-Batista underground and held a temporary eminence in the Castro regime; he quit not because he disagreed with many of Castro's economic measures, but because he could not endure the ruthless sound of the firing squads and the encroachments of alien commissars. He cannot be branded a rum-runner for the Bacardi interests; or a stooge of "U. S. imperialism." Neither does he seek to be carried ashore triumphantly by U. S. Marines.

One hardly dares to prophesy that he will be Cuba's liberator. I have no way of knowing whether his decision to undertake his hazardous journey indicates that he has assurance of early momentous disaffection within the Castro structure, or whether this is only the first scene in a long, perhaps tragic, drama. Nor do I maintain that he alone holds the key to Cuba's future.

What is important at this juncture is that Americans who dream of neat military solutions in Cuba recognize that Ray and his cohorts were right in 1961; loud American noises are more likely to hamper rather than help his efforts, and those of comparable men. Let it also be understood that an effective effort will bear no resemblance to counter-revolution; it will be a fight for freedom, or it will be another doomed exercise.

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There are those who believe Ray's return, mingled with other internal troubles and an apparent Soviet interest in the "normalization" of U.S.-Cuban relations, may persuade Castro that the game is up, and that he can save his own neck only by seeking real accommodation with both the U. S. and the legitimate Cuban opposition. Others, like Theodore Draper, who have most attentively followed Cuban affairs, see no chance of such a development; for Castro to abandon his own "mystique," still plainly attractive to Cuba's younger generation, would be to commit political suicide, they assert. In their view Castro ceases to exist once he abandons his cult of personality; any overtures for reconciliation (as in his recent interview with ABC's Lisa Howard) can only be gambits.

This could surely be a matter for private diplomatic exploration. If there were one chance in a thousand that Cuban liberty could be won without the loss of many gallant lives, it should not be missed. Meanwhile, in human terms, one thinks of the lonely days and nights confronting Manuel Ray, the classic symbol of the revolutionary striving to redeem the cause for which he abandoned all comforts of life, and of the torment his name must bring to Fidel Castro.